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Title: Farmers' innovations have paid off - Couple win national achievement award

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Young farmers such as John and Jill Mahan of Lexington are rare.

"In agriculture, there's not a huge financial reward to stay in farming," John said. "It's a passion and a love of tilling the dirt and being part of nature and producing food."

It takes faith to farm for a living, said John, 33, who along with his wife, Jill, 34, farms 2,000 acres in Fayette, Scott, Bourbon and Harrison counties. But the Mahans' risk-taking and dedication has paid off, earning them the American Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers' national Achievement Award for innovative young farmers.

The average age of a farmer in 1997 was in the 50s, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The upcoming generation faces many financial challenges, including paying a high inheritance tax if they inherit a farm, John said. Even buying agricultural land in Central Kentucky is a challenge, because the thoroughbred industry drives up land prices, with some farms costing \$10,000 per acre, John said.

The Mahans received the award this month and were up against 38 other nominees from around the United States who also won achievement awards on the state level.

"It's been a passion, a drive, and a goal that I've worked towards," John said. "It's incredible to be recognized as the best in the nation. It's very humbling."

John is a fourth generation farmer from Lexington. He grew up on a farm at Man o' War Boulevard and Nicholasville Road but moved in 1996 to the north side of Fayette County, where part of his farm is located. Jill grew up on a corn and soybean farm in Ohio.

The couple own 523 acres of the 2,000 acres they farm. The land is within a 15-mile radius of their home on Russell Cave Road.

The pair said they always wanted to continue their families' tradition of farming. John remembers he would try to stay home from school so he could work on the farm. Even while attending the University of Kentucky, he farmed a portion of his dad's farm and

rented two additional farms. He left the university to farm full-time.

"There are people born to be doctors, there are people who are born to be lawyers, and there are people born to be farmers," said Jill.

John's passion, and necessity, led him to diversify his farming operations. The government tobacco quota would be cut every year, but his farm payments remained the same. He had to look for alternatives to increase farm income.

"I wanted to stay on the farm, and I was determined to find some way to make it work," he said.

Now the Mahans produce burley tobacco, beef cattle, wheat, soybeans, corn and alfalfa. They also lease about one-fourth of their acres to thoroughbred farms. They run a company called Sodworks that produces 300 acres of sod annually, and the farm has partnered with Creech Inc. in Lexington for composting horse manure.

Their innovative farm management has incorporated technology. The Mahans use a GPS guiding system to spray crops, and a computer device to electronically record the production from a combine.

Along with the award, the couple received a 2007 Dodge Ram 3500 4X4 pickup. It's another vehicle to add to their Kubota RTV, an award from the Kentucky Farm Bureau, which honored them with the Outstanding Young Farm Family award in December.

The Mahans are the third couple from Kentucky to win the national honor. The last national winners from Kentucky were in 1978 and 1987, said Terri Bradshaw of the Kentucky Farm Bureau.

John hopes to pass on his farming passion to his 18-month-old son, Lane. Lane already might be leaning toward farming: His first word was "tractor," Jill said.

"It's pretty encouraging to me," John said. "It looks to me he is pretty interested."

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